

Beware 8 Out Of 10 Statistics

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This week I came across an article in Forbes magazine (not my usual reading, I hasten to add!) which irritated and inspired me in equal measure. Under the title "The Ten Most Peaceful Countries Don't Include US" it highlighted the world's ten most peaceful countries as measured by the "Negative Peace" and "Positive Peace" criteria in the Global Peace Index.

The former, as you would expect, is essentially the absence of war or violence – and hence not that hard to assess. The latter seeks to measure peace by the presence of "structures and institutions that create and maintain peace". At one level that is easy. At another, I suspect it is profoundly misleading – not least because peace is far more complex than we might wish to assume, and certainly far more than a head-count of peace structures would indicate.

And this exemplifies my irritation – the tendency of those in the mediation (or wider peace-making) field to quote in support of what we have to offer a bewildering array of often meaningless statistics, concerning costs savings, savings in court budgets, savings in parties' time, improvements in satisfaction levels, and so on. Leaving aside how accurate some of these figures can really be, we seem to operate on the assumption that anyone seeing these compelling statistics would at once see the error of their ways in having chosen some other approach (the courts for example), and swiftly opt for mediation, complete with happy ending. Not only does this simplistic analysis call into question our capacity properly to engage with conflict in all its myriad nuances, it should rightly offend those caught up in conflict. Conflict, and hence peace, are profoundly subtle and complex realities, as much the subject of moral principle, Darwinian flight or fight instincts, fear, hopelessness and sheer bloody-mindedness, as any rational analysis. The promotion of mediation would benefit from a willingness to acknowledge this complexity, and hence our own humble contribution to its resolution.

Of course, there are plenty of success stories that emanate from the mediation field, and rightly so. These fire-side stories are a valued part of our culture as mediators, and we exchange them to encourage each other, and no doubt to blow the odd personal trumpet. "Did I tell you about the mediation when...". But we should not thereby be duped into believing that these happy endings (and there are some) describe the totality.

And yet I also confess to finding some inspiration in the article. It briefly articulated the benefits of peace to business – what we usually call "the peace dividend", and cited the following passage from the Global Peace Index:

"If the world had been 25% more peaceful over the past year the global economy would have reaped an additional economic benefit of just over US\$2 trillion. This amount would pay for the 2% of global GDP per annum investment estimated by the Stern Review to avoid the worst effects of climate change, cover the cost of achieving the Millennium Development Goals, eliminate the public debt of Greece, Portugal and Ireland, and address the one-off rebuilding costs of the most expensive natural disaster in history – the 2011 Japanese earthquake and tsunami".

That, of course, is one of those statistics which I have just berated (see above!), and on any view must be almost impossible to calculate with any kind of certainty. But such is the nature of the statistic that even if it is overstated by several hundred percentage points, it still manages to convey the significance of what mediators, and everyone who works for peace, are engaged in. Whatever the numbers involved, the moral significance of making peace is clear.

Might I suggest that if we take seriously the *inherent* value of what we do, we will not feel obligated to search for happy-ever-after statistics to demonstrate its value or persuade others to buy it, and will be content to immerse ourselves in the confused, messy, convoluted and utterly real conflicts in which we serve.